



Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

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Testimony of Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc.

H. B. No. 6494 (Raised) An Act Concerning Teen Dating Violence Education
Elizabeth Cafarella, Director of Public Policy and Communication
Submitted to the Education Committee
Public Hearing, February 23, 2009

Good afternoon Senator Gaffey, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Committee, my name is Elizabeth Cafarella, and I am the Director of Public Policy and Communication at Connecticut Sexual Assault Crisis Services, Inc. (CONNSACS).

CONNSACS is the statewide association of nine community-based rape crisis centers in Connecticut. Our mission is to end sexual violence and ensure high quality, comprehensive and culturally competent sexual assault victim services.

CONNSACS submits this testimony in support of HB 6494 An Act Concerning Teen Dating Violence Education. We support all efforts to develop and implement healthy relationship school curricula, and further encourage curricula that not only address risk reduction strategies but prevention messages that address perpetrator behavior.

Sexual violence perpetrated by both adults and adolescents on young persons is a significant health problem for teens. Nearly twenty percent of the victims and survivors we serve are between the ages of 13-18. According to the Center for Sex Offender Management (CSOM), adolescents are responsible for a significant number of rape and molestation cases each year. That is why the overwhelming majority of the education programs that our member programs conduct are geared towards children and teens and conducted in the classroom.

We see a great opportunity in HB 6494 to improve the health of Connecticut's teens by promoting healthy relationships and challenging the notion that abuse is normal. Our member programs currently partner with dozens of schools throughout the state to provide classroom lessons and activities to all grade levels. Our programs highlight both **risk reduction and primary prevention messages.**

Current research shows that risk reduction programs are not effective at decreasing sexual violence as they focus on the victim, or the potential victims and the steps he or she might take to avoid sexual violence or an unhealthy relationship. Because risk reduction strategies address victim behavior rather than perpetrator behavior, they are ineffective at stopping abuse. *Primary prevention strategies seek to reduce, and ultimately eliminate, sexual assault by identifying and taking action against the factors that cause and support the perpetration of dating violence.*

To create a world without sexual violence young people must learn how not to abuse or become an offender themselves, and how to recognize the signs of abuse. The numbers of youth who are experiencing dating abuse is alarming, and many teens believe that abusive behaviors are acceptable. A recent national study published in the CDC Morbidity and Mortality Report (MMWR) examined data from CDC's 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) to evaluate the link between physical dating violence and selected behaviors that can place adolescents' health and well-being at risk. The study shows that one in eleven high school students reported physical dating violence victimization in the past 12 months equating to nearly 1.5 million high school students a year. These same adolescents are more likely to report binge drinking, suicide attempts, physical fighting and current sexual activity, all of which impact their health and well-being.

Many of the survivors of child and teen sexual abuse tell us that they simply did not have the words or knowledge to know that what their teacher, classmate or boyfriend was doing was wrong. Many survivors tell us that they since their communities were silent about healthy and unhealthy relationships, consent, respect, sexual health and abuse, that they had a much harder time disclosing the abuse they experienced to an adult or to the police. Many of them never did.

When young people can comfortably speak about sexuality with adults and understand the difference between healthy and unhealthy sexual interaction, they are more likely to identify sexual abuse and tell an adult.

We would be happy to answer any questions you may have regarding our position or services. Please feel free to contact me by email (ecafarella@connsacs.org) or by phone (860.282.9881).

Thank you for your consideration.